

*Cover Sheet*

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*Previously funded by CURCA?* \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_X\_\_\_No

***Title of Proposal: Avatar creation given sexual discrimination and effects of stereotype inconsistent information on perceptions of Male and Female Gamers***

*End date for proposed activities: April 30th, 2013*

### **Description of proposed research project:**

The video game industry is increasingly becoming a juggernaut in terms of dollars, market share and the mind share of adolescents and young adults in America. Today the average player is between 18-34 and spends approximately 6-16 hours a week playing video games (NPD, 2008). These games offer players the opportunity to explore and interact with others across the globe on a routine basis. Many of today's most popular games allow players to create custom avatars that represent the player in the digital space. Researchers have argued that this digital space allows players to create multiple representations of themselves including some that may be closer to their idealized self than their real world counterpart (Bessiere, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Lawson, 2000). The current study seeks to examine areas of discrimination and stereotyping within the core audience of this industry.

Student participants will be invited to play a video game to earn credit for a course. Before play, female students will overhear a male player using vague derogatory comments about the skill level of female players (control participants will hear no comments), thereby priming their gender and making these feelings salient within the individual. Players will then record a short video answering demographic questions related to their level of skill, play and enjoyment of games. Players will then be asked to create an avatar in the game *Neverwinter Nights 2*, and play for 15 minutes to get used to the controls. Players will answer questions related to their choices of avatar creation (gender, height, weight, etc) as well as their feelings about the game and their perception of the skill during the game. Players will complete a measure on their gender centrality. Data related to the player's avatar creation will be analyzed between the control and experimental groups.

In a related study in this project, participants will view video interviews of male and female gamers wherein their gameplay will be manipulated to be perceived as skilled/unskilled in *Halo*. Female and male gamers presented in the video will describe their attitudes towards games as either favorable or unfavorable, and their skill level as being either adequate or above average. Participants will view these pairings and complete assessments related to stereotype consistent/inconsistent information. The study seeks to examine if viewing a stereotype inconsistent female gameplay who is highly skilled at the game can sway perceptions of both male and female gamers, or if these players are merely "the exception to the rule". Participants will complete several measures addressing their perceptions of the onscreen players skill level, extraversion, agreeableness, friendliness, aggressiveness, masculinity, femininity, (Eden et al, 2010). Each participant's time commitment is expected to be between 30-45 minutes.

### **Significant of the proposed work:**

As the United States becomes more culturally, racially and ethnically diverse more research is needed to understand how many minorities traverse their worlds, particular in terms of their racial and ethnic identities. Many college age women participate in playing video games

as a pastime and offer an excellent source to investigate how gender identity may moderate how these users choose to portray themselves online. Traditionally video games have utilized a White male protagonist (e.g., Half-Life, Halo, Mario, Legend of Zelda) however many games now allow the player to customize their avatar to suit their desired experience in terms of race and gender of the character (Fallout 3, World of Warcraft, Rock Band, Left 4 Dead) (Eden, Maloney, & Bowman, 2010). The majority of video games however still adheres to the White male standard as the main character or default in the customization list. While common perception may suggest that men are the majority of individuals who play video games, research suggest that women play games with regularity as well, and perceive themselves to be as skilled if not more skilled than many male gamers (Terlecki et al., 2010). However, research also notes that female gamers tend to shy away from online multiplayer games, but have not attributed this to any one cause (Eden et al, 2010; Stermer & Burkley, 2012; Terlecki et al., 2010) .

To our knowledge no research has explored how gender identity as well as gender centrality may moderate the relationship between the player and their customized avatar, nor how inconsistent stereotypic information may have an effect on gamers' perceptions of female gameplay. While many studies focus on how we escape to the world of gaming to alleviate the tensions of real life, few investigate what social characteristics continually derail female gamer's enjoyment, as well as how their gender centrality and perceptions of skill level may moderate the effect of harassment in an online atmosphere. The results of this study would allow us to build upon the extant knowledge concerning why women become discouraged in online gaming settings, and what personality characteristics may serve as a buffer of discrimination.

### **Goals and expected products:**

We expect to present the completed studies at SEPA in 2013 as two posters as well as completing a manuscript for submission to *CyberPsychology and Behavior* in 2013 as the results of this study should prove relevant to their core literature.

### **Plan for involvement of undergraduates:**

Two undergraduate students, Shelby Flores and Angela Kerr, have conducted literature reviews in preparation for this methodology and will assist heavily in preparing the IRB applications. Shelby and Angela will conduct the study as well as split data analysis duties and present the information at SEPA. Both Studies will be run concurrently and each student will be the head of their own research project. Both students will be responsible for creating and presenting their research at a regional conference. Dr. Dawson will serve as advisor to the project and guide both students through data collection and analysis as well as preparation for a regional conference and the NGRC.

**Productivity from Previous CURCA funded projects:** No previously funded projects on file.

**Budget and Project Timeline**

Item/Travel to conduct study	\$Cost
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	Meeting
4/1/13	Submission of manuscript to <i>CyberPsychology and Behavior</i>